

The Garden Dances Through The Children
By Mēgan McGee Ingram

Teaching permaculture through dance is easy. The experience of teaching evolved throughout the year as I came to know the students and the garden. At times, we would reflect on our experiences in a “sharing circle,” where the students would pantomime, recreating, reflecting, and remembering the motions that they went through as they tended to the garden, including weeding, watering and tasting dances.

I would instruct everyone to sit in a circle facing one another, in preparation for an activity of sharing. I asked everyone to think of one moment within all of the moments that had just happened, where something they were doing felt good to them, something they would want to do again. It could be just observing a bee on a flower, or noticing that a plant is thirsty, and being aware of that. It could be mulching or pulling a weed, feeling the roots come up through the circle.

Now close your eyes and picture yourself repeating this one moment. Notice your body as a part of the environment, as a part of the garden. Now feel your body and where it is now, sitting in the circle. We’re going to, one at a time, recreate these moments, and we’ll try to guess what each of us is sharing and revisiting. I found this worked best when the students volunteered movements of their own volition, when they felt comfortable. I never went first, allowing them to structure their own relationship with the garden, giving them more control of who would share first, allowing them to grow together naturally and play off of one another.

Another version of this activity would be to have everyone stand up in the circle, and go around in the circle one after another. A student would volunteer to begin the dance with their expression, and everyone else would try it, integrating the active work of the garden into their social relationships. They exchanged physically what work they experienced during their gardening time. The first person would go, and then everybody would try that move, in a physical “call/response” exercise. For example, a student would do a watering dance, and each member of the sharing circle would do that, and then the next person would add onto it with their own movement. Each student would both give to the circle their own contribution, and receive and accept their classmates through the dance.

The interdependent relationships form in the sharing circle reflecting the Edible Schoolyard. This is a building activity, and involves the participant’s together as a medium for symbiotic exchange. The kinesthetic internalization of knowledge that occurs during the activity is a great educational tool, for both teachers and learners, and is suited for any environment.

These exercises culminated in spring semester 2004, in a celebration honoring the Earth day on April 21, 2004. Rather than involving small classes of 12, the entire GMS community participated in one big sharing circle. They paid respect to the ancestor's of the garden, with West African drummer's playing songs that had been sustained thorough the use of the djembe (drum) over many centuries. This allowed the GMS community to understand the link between the garden and the sustainability of their community. Some of the shared movements came from the garden dances of West Africa.

Essentially, the garden dances through the children. As the months progressed, we incorporated this introspective exercise into the actual maintenance and growing of the garden—teaching and learning cannot be mutually exclusive. In other words, I was participating equally with the student's in the dancing gardening, learning along with them the ancient movements involved in caring for the land and the plants. The activities involved in gardening, incorporating principles of permaculture design, kept our attention.

The sharing circle is not limited to a particular moment in time and space. I have come to realize that the sharing (of the dance of the garden) of discrete experiences ought to extend into the community of the school. This needs to be developed further, as there is a desperate need for unity among all aspects of the educational experience, even in the exceptional environment provided by Greensboro Montessori School.